

# African American Culture and the World Around You

Both free and enslaved Africans brought unique cultural traditions to North Carolina from their native homelands during the colonial period. These traditions influence how we live today.

More than three and a half times the size of the United States, Africa is the second-largest continent on earth. It is made up of 47 countries and six island nations. Each country has its own unique customs and languages.

There are nearly 2,000 different African languages. Pidgin languages came about as a way for native and non-native speakers of a language to communicate. Pidgin combines words and phrases from different languages to create a common language. Pidgins were frequently used in trade areas and aboard slave ships during passage to the New World. Traces of these languages remain in our vocabulary. For example, okay, bug, jamboree, mumbo jumbo, and bogus all have African roots.

Over time, African traditions merged with the traditions of other cultures. Do you know how African traditions affect the world around you?

## Foods and Cooking

The African tradition you may be most familiar with is cooking. Certain foods—rice, okra, peanuts, yams, watermelons, some types of gourds, and guinea fowl—came to North Carolina from Africa as a result of the slave trade. The climate of North Carolina is much like that of Western Africa, and the crops that were brought here thrived.

African cooks took special pride in their recipes and meal preparation. They used spices like red pepper and sesame seeds to season dishes. They also used vegetable or meat broths—called pot liquor—instead of water to give food added flavor. Some foods were breaded and then fried in oil for a quick and tasty meal. Today, North Carolinians of many races prepare and eat similar dishes.



*Visitors at an N.C. Museum of History program learn how African cooking traditions influence what we eat today.*

## Arts and Crafts

African-inspired art comes in many forms. It can be ceremonial (like a mask), functional (like a basket), or decorative (like a painting). African traits and symbols can be seen in the works of furniture makers, wood-carvers, weavers, quilters, and other artisans both past and present. One African wood-carving tradition is to create an object from a single piece of wood. Another is to use sharp angles when carving human figures. Many African weavers, who were traditionally men, wove bright textiles. Colors like red and white were very popular. Bright colors and the African tradition of sewing narrow strips of cloth together to create wraps or blankets were adopted in making quilts. Craftspeople today continue to use African-inspired designs and symbols to create objects that are both African and American.



*This 1930s strip quilt shows the influence of African textile traditions.*

## Music and Dance

Many cultures express themselves and their histories through music and dance. People use voice, movement, or an instrument to keep rhythm. Enslaved Africans were unable to bring physical items from their homeland, but they were able to re-create their music and dance traditions in America.

African music and dance practices have changed over time, but their traces can be found all around us. African rhythms are present in the playground chants of children jumping rope or playing hand-clapping games. Tap, buck, and step dancers blend traditional dance steps with new moves. Call-and-response singing is heard in jazz music and gospel choirs.